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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7392

INFO RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000265

SIPDIS

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DEPT FOR EAP/MLS, DRL, AND IO  
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SUBJECT: THAI DREAMS: THE ECONOMIC PULL ON THE KAREN

REF: RANGOON 258

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**¶1.** (SBU) Summary. The increasingly poor economic conditions in Karen State drive many young people, particularly women, into Thailand every year. While jobs and money available there have the potential to lead to a better life, women are often lured into situations where they work under abusive conditions without receiving their promised salaries. The migration also breaks up social structures and leads to the spread of disease in Karen State, particularly HIV/AIDS. End Summary.

#### The Push Out of Karen State

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**¶2.** (SBU) On March 28-30, Poloff traveled to Hpa-An, Karen State and observed first-hand the severe inequality, poor education, and inadequate healthcare in the area. Most houses in villages around Hpa-An consist of a single room built from basic wood poles and leaf thatch that owners must replace each year in advance of the monsoon season. Scattered among them are new houses constructed from concrete, tile, and glass with several rooms. These better houses are owned by people who have gone to Thailand to work and save money for a few years before returning to build their new homes.

**¶3.** (SBU) Education facilities in the area are far from adequate. One school that we visited, which teaches approximately 300 students, consisted of two small dark rooms with almost no furniture. Of the seven young women in their late teens and early twenties with whom we spoke, only three have passed their tenth standard exams, the Burmese equivalent of a high school diploma. Although all of them had been taught in Burmese, only a few understood it and fewer still spoke it, because they were never asked to respond to their teachers throughout the course of their school education. They communicated solely in Karen.

**¶4.** (SBU) The healthcare situation in Karen State is equally insufficient to meet the needs of the population, explained

Helen Yin, a retired nurse. While there are doctors and clinics in Hpa-An, most villages in Karen State lack any medical care at all, and those with anything have only a midwife or a traditional birth attendant (TBA) who has no formal training. Some villages also have a traditional medic, whose position is based more on social standing in the community than any real medical knowledge. As a result, ignorance about disease perpetuates itself among the villages, lamented Yin. Few people use any form of family planning, because they are afraid that it will harm the mother. Parents do not bring their children for follow-up vaccines, because they believe that one dose should suffice. Villagers seek medical assistance for severe cases of influenza, dengue, and malaria only when it is too late to help the patient, because they cannot afford the hospital charges.

#### The Thai Pull on the Karen

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¶5. (SBU) The possibility of better work and pay in Thailand lures many young Karen, particularly women, away from their native towns. They work across the border as nannies, housemaids, and factory workers, often earning 3,000 to 5,000 baht per month (USD 95 to 158), far more than the average salary in Karen State, where a person might only earn USD 158 in a year. Generally, the Karen who travel to Thailand stay for four to five years, save up enough money to build a house and support their families for a few years, and then return to their native villages. Once they return, they usually get married and start families of their own. The benefits of going to Thailand tempt most young people at some point in their lives. Of the seven young women we met, half planned to leave immediately following the Thingyan Water Festival this month, and only two did not have plans to go at all.

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¶6. (SBU) Unfortunately, explained 17 year old Khine Thazin Thin, the whole story is not nearly so simple as earning money and returning to a better life. Many of the girls who go to Thailand fall into traps with crooked brokers, who torture them and deny their promised salaries. The broker fees alone can cost 600,000 kyat (USD 540) if they include full documentation for the worker. Cheaper and easier options exist if the young women are willing to travel by bus or truck across the border. Even then, bribes to cross the border into Thailand cost about 10,000 baht (USD 316), in addition to whatever broker fees the immigrant has incurred.

¶7. (SBU) Aye Aye Myint, another young woman, lamented that the migration pattern also creates widespread social problems among the Karen. After an initial trip to Thailand, people usually only stay in their native villages until the new money runs out, before returning to earn more. If one spouse stays behind with the children, very often that person finds a new partner, because of the long absence and lack of communication with their migrant spouse. In Thailand as well, the migrant spouse often finds new partners. Usually, she explained, stepparents do not want to take on the responsibility of looking after the children, so their parents leave them in the care of grandparents. By the time a person reaches the age of forty, they can begin to rely on their own children to go to Thailand to earn money to support them, she explained.

¶8. (SBU) Yin also pointed to the migration as a major cause of the soaring HIV/AIDS rate in Karen State. People engage in high-risk behavior when they go to Thailand, and then they return to spread the disease around villages, she said. She had no exact data on what the infection rate is, but she noticed higher rates of infection when people came to her clinic for blood tests to diagnose other diseases. She has worked to spread HIV/AIDS awareness, but feels that her impact is minimal.

¶9. (SBU) All of the women with whom we spoke would rather stay in Karen State if only they could earn modest incomes to support themselves. Aye Aye Myint said that with a little more training and some initial capital, she would like to open a drug store in her home village. Others echoed her desire to stay, most wanting to work in the medical field, as pharmacists or midwives. A few wanted to work as teachers. A modest income of 50,000 to 60,000 kyat per month (USD 45 to 54) would keep them in Karen State, they agreed.

¶10. (SBU) Comment: As the economic and political situations in Karen State continue to worsen, people leave in greater numbers, leading to the further breakdown of the social structures in the villages. A lack of cohesiveness in communities will make it more difficult to educate the population to seek democratic and economic reform in their own country, rather than risky money on the other side of the border. End Comment.

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